

Educational Aspirations of Rural Adolescents

Although rural populations are declining, one third of America's public schools are in rural areas (Provasnick et al., 2007). Rural educators often face conflicting messages about how to best prepare their students for the future. On one hand, rural communities depend on their youth to continue rural lifestyles, traditions, and customs, as well as to contribute the economic vitality of their communities. On the other hand, many small town and rural communities have faced serious economic decline. Employment opportunities in farming, extraction, and manufacturing occupations, considered to be the mainstay of rural industries, are no longer available to rural youth who have only a high school diploma. Even fewer opportunities are available for those students who leave high school without a diploma. An important goal of the Rural High School Aspirations (RHSA) Study was to document (1) the educational aspirations of rural youth, and (2) the individual, family, and school influences that shape their educational plans. A key focus of survey questions was to identify malleable school-related influences related to the 8,000 rural adolescent participants' educational aspirations.

Key Findings

Assessing youth's aspirations is important. Educational plans and goals serve as important guideposts to the future. Study results indicate that a majority of the participating students aspire to obtain a postsecondary degree (two- or four-year). Specifically, 13% of the students aspired to attend and complete a two-year degree at a community or vocational/trade school, and 77% planned to complete college or an advanced graduate/professional degree. In general, teachers reported lower educational aspirations for the students. When matched with their students, only 25% of the students and teachers had aligned expectations and 68% of students had misaligned educational expectations, with student reporting higher educational aspirations for themselves than their teachers reported. Additional analyses revealed that teacher expectations were significant contributors to youth's aspirations, particularly for male students, even after controlling for the influences of family factors (family income, parental education, and family size). Moreover, our results show that for more isolated rural communities, teachers play an especially important role in providing a pathway to future educational and vocational opportunities.

What This Tells Us

Rural youth today desire greater access to postsecondary education than ever before. Studies suggest that rural youth are less likely than their metropolitan counterparts to achieve their educational goals (Byun, Meece & Irvin, 2011). Critical contributors to educational attainment of all youth are support from family and friends, access to postsecondary preparation programs, and financial resources. Although our data suggest that rural youth are advantaged with regard to social capital (support family, school, and community relations), they continue to be disadvantaged in terms of family and school resources to prepare for postsecondary education. Rural schools should encourage students to continue discussing their futures with teachers and counselors while also encouraging students to take part in school-to-work transition programs to help students consider possible careers. Schools with limited resources should capitalize on rural social capital (e.g., parent-school-community leader partnerships) to help create opportunities for rural youth to learn more about postsecondary educational and career options. The Institute of Education Sciences offers a research-based practice guide for educators to help students navigate the transition to postsecondary education. The reference is listed below.

References

- Irvin, M. J., Meece, J. L., Byun, S.-Y., Farmer, T. W., & Hutchins, B. C. (2011). Relationship of school context to rural youth's educational achievement and aspirations. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 40, 1225-1242. doi:10.1007/s10964-011-9628-8
- Griffin, D., Hutchins, B.C., & Meece, J. L. (2011). Where do rural high school students go to find information about their futures? *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 89, 172-181.
- Meece, J. L. (2009, November). *Overview of Rural High School Aspirations Study*. Presentation at the Supporting Rural Schools and Schools Conference, Chapel Hill, NC.
- Provasnik, S., Kewal-Remani, A., Coleman, M. M., Gilbertson, L., Herring, W., & Xie, Q. (2007). *Status of education in rural America* (NCES 2007-040). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.